



# DECADES OF POPULIST DEMOCRACY CONSTRUED AS LIBERAL DEMOCRACY IN NIGERIA: A THEORETICAL ANALYSIS

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This paper interrogates the misconception of populist democracy as liberal democracy in Nigeria. While liberal democracy emphasises private property, individual rights, the rule of law, democratic institutions, and citizens' participation in the political process, populist democracy undermines these principles by prioritizing mass appeal over institutional integrity. Drawing insights from populism theory, liberal democracy theory, and an extensive literature review, the paper examines how populism has increasingly become a defining feature of Nigerian politics, shaping electoral processes and governance. The paper reveals that Nigerian political leaders derive electoral legitimacy through elections and claim to represent the will of the people, but often undermine liberal democratic institutions and principles. They exploit popular grievances such as corruption, economic inequality, insecurity, weak democratic institutions, and promote illiberal democratic practices in the country. The paper argues that Nigeria's democratic experience reflects an illiberal democracy sustained by populist politics. It recommends public awareness campaigns to educate citizens on liberal principles and the dangers of populist politics in Nigeria. This will guarantee democratic sustainability and realign governance with true liberal democratic principles in Nigeria.

**Keywords:** Democracy, populist democracy, liberal democracy, illiberal democracy, Nigeria

## Introduction

In the complex landscape of Nigeria's political development, populist democratic practices are confused with the principles of liberal democracy. This misconception has profound implications for governance, institutional development, and the consolidation of democratic norms in the country. While Nigeria has maintained regular democratic transition since its return to civilian rule in 1999, the mere observance of electoral processes has often been mistaken for fully realizing liberal democratic values. Democracy, as a system of government, thrives on the principles of representation, accountability, and the protection of individual rights (Held, 2006). However, the structure of democracy practiced in different countries often diverges based on historical, political, and socio-economic contexts. Nigeria's democratic space has been characterised by a merging of populist and liberal democratic ideals, leading to a fundamental misinterpretation of populist democracy as liberal democratic governance.

Globally, populist democracy highlights the idea of a division between "the people" and "the elite," claiming to represent the people's voice or will (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). Liberal

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democracy, in its true form, upholds individual rights, private property, the rule of law, and democratic institutions that facilitate citizens' participation in governance (Lijphart, 2012). These forms of democracies currently shape democratic governance on a global scale.

In Europe, Latin America, and the United States, notable right-wing figures such as Silvio Berlusconi in Italy, Marine Le Pen in France, Alberto Fujimori in Peru, Nicolas Maduro in Venezuela, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, and Donald Trump in the U.S. have utilised nationalist and anti-establishment rhetoric to garner support during election campaigns. According to Diamond (2020), these leaders often emphasise themes of nativism, anti-immigration sentiment, and protectionism, advocating for social welfare programmes, wealth redistribution, and cultural identity, while criticizing the ruling elite for being disconnected from the concerns of ordinary citizens. Populist leaders in these regions are frequently accused of manipulating fears and prejudices to advance their political goals, often at the expense of minority rights and civil liberties (Deiwiks, 2009; Moffit, 2016; Abromeit, 2017).

In Africa, populist leaders like Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, Muammar Gaddafi of Libya, Thomas Sankara of Burkina Faso, Jacob Zuma of South Africa, Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe, Nnamdi Azikiwe, Obafemi Awolowo and Aminu Kano of Nigeria used personalistic rule, mass mobilization, anti-elite, nationalist and anti-colonial rhetoric to consolidate power. These leaders leveraged charismatic communication, wealth redistribution, free education, healthcare, anti-imperialism, and pan-African rhetoric to engage with the masses (Iwilade, 2017; Omotosho, 2018; Odoemene, 2019). They typically present themselves as not part of the corrupt political establishment, attracting individuals who feel marginalised or disillusioned by the ruling elite.

In Nigeria, populist rhetoric and policies have gained traction since the country transitioned to democracy in 1999. The country has witnessed the rise of populist politics, where leaders and political actors employ populist rhetoric to appeal directly to the masses. Political leaders such as Muhammadu Buhari, Bola Tinubu, and the Presidential flag-bearer of the Labour Party in the 2023 presidential election, Peter Obi deployed populist rhetoric during election campaigns (Katsina, 2023; Fasan, 2023; Ojo, 2023; Farooq, 2024). The failure of successive administrations to enunciate human capital and economic development, social and cultural stability, strong institutions, a conducive electoral process devoid of political violence, and above all, address corruption and security issues like the Boko Haram insurgency, promoted the rise of populist politics in the country (Ibeanu & Momoh 2019). These factors contributed to the growing public discontent and set the stage for more populist appeals during the transition to new administrations. This trend has led to a system where electoral victories are mistaken for democratic legitimacy, even when governance lacks transparency, accountability, and adherence to constitutional principles.

The complexity associated with populist democracy and the failure of populist and liberal leaders to sustain their political rhetoric and fulfil electoral promises in a dependent economy like Nigeria has further exposed how populist democracy is construed as a liberal democracy. The form of liberalism practiced in Nigeria is built on a dependent economy where the ruling



elites are not in control of the economy. The extent to which the people possess knowledge and understanding regarding the interception of populist democracy with liberal democracy in Nigerian politics remains uncertain. Thus, this study critically examines how populist tendencies disguised as liberal values have shaped Nigeria's democracy. It examines the implications of this misconception on governance, institutional integrity, and civic engagement, while highlighting the dangers of a political system driven more by mass appeal than by democratic ethos. Dissecting the blurry lines between populist and liberal democracy, this paper seeks to provide insights into Nigeria's democratic trajectory and the necessary reforms to realign governance with true democratic principles.

### **Conceptual Clarification**

#### **Democracy**

Conceptualizing democracy is a complex and multifaceted endeavour that has been a subject of extensive scholarly discourse. According to Johari (2015), the great Greek leader, Pericles, defined democracy as 'a government in which people are powerful'; Aristotle similarly defined democracy as 'the rule of many,' while President Abraham Lincoln of the United States defined democracy as the 'government of the people, by the people, and for the people.' Abraham Lincoln's definition is widely accepted among these. These definitions emphasise the importance of the majority in a democratic system. They point to the fact that democratic governments allow the will of the majority over that of the minority, thereby increasing the total good in society and satisfying the popular will.

However, Ceaser (1990), Gutmann (1992), Arthur (1992), and Graham (1992) are in doubt as to whether democracy in actual practice can provide the platform to satisfy the popular will of the people. Ceaser posits that democracy is a republic with a representative government operating under constitutional restraints. The argument here is on the extent to which the representatives can rule according to the will of the majority. Arthur and Gutmann contend the possibility of democracy providing the required commitment to treat all citizens as equals. Graham argues that democracy is the government of a selected few. While these scholars hold divergent views on the meaning and concept of democracy, their primary concern is the possibility of the representatives who are elected by the people, and ruling according to the will of the people. Perhaps this was what informed the opinion of Gutmann (cited in Babatunde, 2018:12) when he argued that "the concept of democracy is disharmonious in many respects." He argues that "individual citizens often face hard political choices such that the conclusions of the representatives of the people are likely to differ from the interest of the majority when confronted with a difficult issue."

Democracy, according to Lijphart (2012), is a system of governance in which the people, via their elected representatives, control the government. This conceptualization shows that political power belongs to the people who govern via representatives they have chosen. This leads to the conclusion that representative government, in which elected officials act on behalf of the people, is a common feature of contemporary democracies. It should be noted that the idea of democracy in this context strongly emphasises the function of political parties, free and fair elections, and the representatives' accountability to the people. The idea that the majority



determines the course of events in a democratic society is the convergence of opinion that lies at the heart of the different conceptualizations. However, it is controversial whether the choices or decisions made by the people's representatives in a democratic system represent the will of the majority.

Held (2006) and Dahl (2015) defined the fundamental tenets of democracy as political equality, popular sovereignty, majority rule with minority rights, and the defense of civil liberties and political freedoms to resolve the uncertainty around the idea. The lawful use of governmental authority and public engagement in political decision-making are supported by these ideals. Similarly, Lijphart (2012) and Diamond (2020) associate democracy with a system of checks and balances, political plurality, free and fair elections, and the rule of law. This means that to prevent the concentration of power in one branch of government and maintain a balance of power, an effective democracy must have a system of checks and balances, where power is divided among the legislative, judicial, and executive branches. Diamond asserts that in a democracy, people are entitled to cast ballots in regular, free, and fair elections to choose their representatives. Lijphart places a strong emphasis on political pluralism, which allows for free participation of many political parties and interest groups in the political process. This makes it easier to guarantee that different groups are represented and included in the political process.

The foregoing analysis shows that democracy is a concept with many faces in terms of its contextual meaning and content. Democracy in terms of its definition varies, ranging from narrow (free, fair, and open elections) to broad interpretations which include civil voting rights, a multi-party system, an independent judiciary, and an independent media. Democracy in its various form points to the protection of individual rights, limited government, deliberative decision-making processes, and how governance is anchored on the interest of the people. This study therefore, conceptualises democracy as a form of self-government in which the people are governed not by themselves as in direct democracy but by a separate government constituted by themselves. This is what Graham (1992) refers to as the government of the elected representatives of the people.

### **Populist Democracy**

Populist democracy poses some challenges in its conceptualization within the academic cycle. In political discourse, populist democracy means different things to different people depending on countries, scholars, situations, or the context in which it is used. Conceptually, populist democracy has been conceived as a system of governance or democracy with a thin-cantered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite” (Mudde, 2004; Gidron & Bonikowski, 2013; Muller, 2016; Moffitt, 2016; Abromeit, 2017; Mueller, 2019). These authors acknowledge that populist democracy is ideologically flexible such that its programmatic content varies considerably across democracies. They argue that populist democracy as a thin-cantered ideology does not provide answers to all the major socio-political questions as found in political belief systems like socialism or liberalism. This is because populist politics is not tied down to any known political ideology. That is, it is not peculiar to either left-wing or right-wing, liberals or conservatives’ political agenda. It is a kind of political



practice employed selectively and strategically by both right and left, liberals and conservatives to achieve their political objectives.

Urbinati (2013) describes populist democracy as a form of democracy that is more characterised by political talk rather than as an ideology or an essential attribute of political parties or leaders. The import of this conceptualization is that populist democracy is a form of politics that involves the mode of political expression or rhetoric employed by a given populist actor. This is what Aristotle (cited in Billing, 2003) refers to as *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos*. *Ethos* is the character or integrity of a person a speaker wishes to present; *pathos* is the mood or tone of the speech; and *logos* is the argument the speaker is advancing. This trend aligns perfectly with the global practice in established and emerging democracies, and among both right-wing and left-wing, conservatives and liberal democrats (Taggart, 2000; Canovan, 2002).

In contrast to ideology and discursive approaches, scholars such as Deiwiiks (2009), Levitsky and Roberts (2013) conceived populist democracy as a mode of political strategy. They see populist democracy in terms of policy choices, political organization, and a form of political mobilization strategy. The idea here is that populist democracy involves the advocacy and implementation of policies that receive support from the populace against the existing elites. In this type of democracy, political leaders claim to be the true and direct representatives of the "common people", but often portray the ruling elite from other parties as corrupt and enemies of the people. The consensus that has been reached among scholars in respect of its meaning is that populist democracy essentially focuses on the "common people" against the "elite" as well as majority rule and popular sovereignty. This type of democracy sees the popular rule system as a promoter of a popular and legitimate decision-making process (Gutmann, 1992). Gutmann posits that populist democrats strongly believe that majorities rather than minorities should decide for their communities, thereby satisfying popular will.

Conversely, Graham (1992) and Diamond (2020) contend the view that the popular will by the populist standards is a democratic will. Graham argues that, over time, even the populist ideal does not or cannot sustain or uphold the conditions necessary for maintaining a truly popular will. His viewpoint is that it is quite misleading to believe that in actual practice the people can rule themselves as free and equal beings through their representatives. In other words, the possibility of populist democracy to provide the required commitment to treat all citizens as equal is much in doubt.

In sum, it is apt to note that populist democracy is a form of governance or democracy that emphasises the will of the common people over the interests of the political elite or establishment. Globally, populist democracy has gained traction and has become a significant political trend in recent years. Factors contributing to the growth of populist democracy across the globe include economic insecurity, poverty, corruption of the elite class, social and cultural backlash against globalization, distrust in traditional political institutions, and the upsurge of social media as a platform for spreading populist messages (Norris & Inglehart, 2019). The continued rise of populist politics across democracies poses significant challenges for the future of liberal democracy especially in a developing economy like Nigeria. The concerns include its potential to lead to authoritarian tendencies, polarization of political discourse, and the



undermining of democratic institutions and norms (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). This phenomenon encourages anti-elite and anti-institution rhetoric that often constitutes a pathology of liberal democracy. This concern forms the focus of this paper and the need to examine populist democracy construed as liberal democracy in Nigeria.

### **Liberal Democracy**

The concept of liberal democracy is complex and multidimensional, and it has been thoroughly studied and discussed in literature. Scholars identify the fundamental components of liberal democracy as the right to private property, the safeguarding of individual rights and freedoms (Dahl, 2015), the rule of law (Johari, 2015), and the presence of democratic institutions that facilitate citizen participation in the political process (Lijphart, 2012). Dahl highlights the necessity of maintaining individual rights, particularly freedom of speech, freedom of religion, and the right to private property, as crucial to liberal democracy. Johari maintains that the rule of law, which demands that both the government and its people be equally responsible to the law, is fundamental for effective functioning of liberal democracy. Lijphart and Dahl stress the relevance of democratic institutions, including a multi-party system, an independent judiciary, and fair election procedures. They maintained that these are essential for liberal democracy to operate effectively and assure the preservation of the people's interests.

Dahl (2015) conceives liberal democracy as a governance system that incorporates two key concepts - liberalism and democracy. According to him, liberalism prioritises individual freedoms, rights, and equality under the law, while democracy relies on the rule of the people, political activity, and accountability. Liberal democracies throughout the world are developed on a combination of these ideas. Thus, the goal of liberal democracy is to promote inclusive, transparent, and responsible administration by preserving a balance between the people's interests and the government's power. It is important to note that Bobbio (Cited in Dahl, 2015) linked the roots of liberal democracy to the ideas of Montesquieu, Immanuel Kant, and John Locke, who fought for the protection of individual liberties and limits on the authority of the state. He believes that the notion acquired popularity in the 20th century, notably during World War II, when countries attempted to form groups capable of fighting authoritarian authority and preserving human rights. Bobbio contends that liberal democracy is not only a synthesis of liberal and democratic ideas but rather a distinct system that balances individual liberty with public sovereignty. For him, a vital aspect of liberal democracy is the safeguarding of individual rights and freedoms. What this connotes is that individual rights and freedoms are legally protected in constitutions, assuring that individuals enjoy freedom of speech, assembly, religion, and organization.

The understanding from the foregoing is that liberal democracy features an autonomous judiciary that safeguards individual rights and oversees government accountability. That is, liberal democracy emphasises the significance of political engagement and accountability. An essential import of the foregoing is that in liberal democracies, citizens possess the right to participate in fair and transparent elections, elect their representatives, and hold them accountable for their deeds. Accountability is a crucial idea to ensure that governments operate in the best interests of their citizens. In addition, liberal democracies support pluralism and



tolerance, which foster differences in opinions, values, and beliefs. It promotes inclusive political discourse, protects the rights of minorities, and makes it easier for various social groups to live in harmony with one another (Dahl, 2015). It is clear from the above that liberal democracy is a political structure that blends democratic administration with the concepts of liberal philosophy. It is distinguished by the rule of law, separation of governmental authorities, respect for minority rights, the defense of individual freedoms, and free and fair elections.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework for analysing the interpretation of populist democracy as liberal democracy in Nigeria draws on populism theory, as developed by Mudde (2004), Laclau (2005), and Müller (2016), and liberal democracy theory as articulated by Dahl (2015), Lijphart (2012), and Johari (2015). These theoretical perspectives offer important insights into the tensions and contradictions that define the practice of democracy in Nigeria.

Populism, as conceptualised by Mudde (2004), is a *thin-centred* ideology that perceives society as fundamentally divided between two antagonistic and homogenous groups: the ‘pure people’ and the ‘corrupt elite’. This dualism forms the basis of populist political mobilization. Populist leaders, according to Mudde, claim to represent the general will of the people, positioning themselves in direct opposition to the elite in government. However, this form of politics is not anchored in a comprehensive political ideology. Rather, it functions as a political strategy that relies largely on rhetorical appeals and emotive policy-promises designed to resonate with popular frustrations, particularly during election campaigns.

Laclau (2005) adds a discursive dimension to this understanding by arguing that populism involves the construction of a collective political identity. For Laclau, populism is a strategic effort to unify diverse social demands through a common rhetoric, thereby mobilizing the people to challenge established power structures. In this sense, populism is not simply an ideology but a mode of political articulation aimed at consolidating power by aggregating and symbolically representing grievances.

Müller (2016) provides a more critical dimension to the theory by underscoring the inherently anti-pluralist nature of populism. According to Müller, populist leaders do not merely criticise elites, they often claim to be the exclusive representative of the "true" will of the people. This anti-pluralism is frequently accompanied by a disregard for democratic norms, such as institutional checks and balances, judicial independence, and the protection of minority rights. Populist leaders may participate in elections and use democratic procedures, but they frequently lack a commitment to liberal values. This reinforces Mudde’s assertion that populism is “democratic in its form” but “illiberal in its content.”

By contrast, liberal democracy theory emphasises a more comprehensive set of political principles. Scholars such as Dahl (2015), Lijphart (2012), and Johari (2015) articulate liberal democracy as a system of governance grounded in individual rights, the rule of law, constitutionalism, private property, and democratic institutions that enable inclusive participation. Dahl underscores the centrality of civil liberties, such as freedom of speech,



religious tolerance, and the protection of private property, as foundational to any functioning liberal democracy. Johari stresses that the rule of law, which binds both the state and citizens, is indispensable for the sustainability of democratic governance. Similarly, Lijphart and Dahl advocate the necessity of democratic institutions, such as multiparty system, an independent judiciary, and fair electoral procedures, as vital mechanisms for ensuring accountability and safeguarding citizens' rights.

The conceptual distinction between liberalism and democracy is critical here. While democracy emphasises popular participation and accountability, liberalism prioritises individual rights, equality before the law, and institutional constraints on political authority. Liberal democracies are built upon a synthesis of these ideals. However, Mudde (2004) cautions that the mere existence of elections should not be equated with liberal democracy. He characterises regimes that hold elections but violate core liberal principles as illiberal democracies.

In the Nigerian context, this theoretical juxtaposition becomes particularly relevant. Populist leaders in Nigeria often emerge by positioning themselves as anti-elite, anti-establishment, and champions of the "common people." They typically exploit widespread grievances, such as corruption, economic inequalities, and social injustice, to galvanise popular support during election campaigns. A prominent example is the 2015 presidential campaign of Muhammadu Buhari, who presented himself as a disciplined, anti-corruption crusader, contrasting himself with the allegedly corrupt elite represented by the then-ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP). Buhari's populist rhetoric portrayed institutions such as the judiciary and the press as obstacles to genuine democratic reform. This aligns with Müller's (2016) warning that populists frequently delegitimise dissent and undermine the very institutions that sustain democratic pluralism.

In Nigeria, populist democracy is often mistaken for liberal democracy merely because it operates within an electoral framework. However, elections alone do not constitute a liberal democracy. As liberal democratic theory contends, elections must be embedded within a broader institutional and normative context, including separation of powers, constitutional guarantees, civil liberties, and legal accountability. Mudde (2004) argues that populism respects the electoral process but not the liberal ethos underpinning it. Therefore, when democracy is reduced to electoral participation without a commitment to liberal norms, it can serve as a façade for authoritarian governance. This is particularly evident in Nigeria, where elected leaders often centralise power, suppress civil liberties, restrict press freedom, and undermine institutional checks. These patterns are symptomatic of populist rule and illustrate the erosion of liberal democratic norms in Nigeria.

The integration of populism and liberal democratic theories provides the lens for examining Nigeria's democratic paradox. Populism, in the Nigerian context, is frequently used as a political strategy to mobilise marginalised constituencies against established elites, but often at the expense of liberal democratic values. Populist leaders appeal to collective emotions and societal grievances rather than fostering informed, rational public deliberation. They cultivate anti-elite sentiments and polarise society along ethnic, religious, and regional lines to



consolidate political power. The 2023 presidential election, for instance, witnessed populist actors mobilizing support from student unions, youth organizations, and ethno-religious communities. These strategies reflect Laclau's discursive populism and Mudde's procedural, but illiberal populism.

To safeguard liberal democracy in Nigeria, proactive measures must be taken to mitigate the corrosive influence of populism on Nigerian politics. Civil society organizations and the media have a critical role to play in reorienting public understanding of democracy. There is a pressing need to educate citizens about their rights and responsibilities, and to emphasise the importance of holding elected leaders accountable beyond the ballot box. Without this reorientation, populist appeals will continue to thrive in a context where democratic form is mistaken for democratic substance.

### **Methodology**

This study adopted descriptive research design. It relies on secondary data sources and employs the method of content analysis. Relevant information was obtained from the library and internet-based materials, including scholarly books and peer-reviewed journal articles. These secondary sources were carefully selected for their relevance and reliability, and they provide sufficient insight to address the research questions posed in this study. The data were systematically analysed using content analysis to facilitate coherent interpretation and presentation of findings.

### **The Rise of Populist Politics in Nigerian Democracy**

Nigeria's political history is embroiled with leaders who have adopted populist politics and strategies since it transitioned to democratic rule in 1999. From military rulers presenting themselves as messianic figures to contemporary civilian leaders who appeal to ethno-religious sentiments, populist politics has emerged as a significant political force, shaping the country's political landscape. Historically, several studies (Adebanwi, 2017; Adeakin & Zirker, 2017; Omotola, 2018; Odubola, 2019; Onapajo, 2021; Shani, 2022; Fasan, 2023; Okocha & Ishaku, 2023; Katsina, 2023; Ojo, 2023; Farooq, 2024) have explored various dimensions of populist politics in Nigeria, shedding light on its manifestations and prevalence, but have largely failed to examine how populist democracy is construed as liberal democracy in the country.

Adeakin and Zirker (2017) observe that Nigeria's history of colonization, long military rule, and pervasive corruption are the main causes of the rise of populist politics in the country. These authors posited that the public's displeasure and dissatisfaction with the political elites, have been exacerbated by the inability of successive administrations to address economic disparity, provide basic services, and assure good governance. They argued that populist leaders in the country exploit the dissatisfaction of the populace to position themselves as champions of the interests of the people against the ruling class. Okocha and Ishaku (2023) situate populist politics in Nigeria within the historical and political structure of the nation. They attribute colonial legacies, ethnic diversity, and economic and leadership challenges to the roots of populist politics in Nigeria. The idea is that populist leaders often mobilise individuals and groups to effect change and challenge the existing power structures to achieve



common political goals. This has implications for social cohesion and nation-building as a result of the diversity of the country.

Nigeria's Fourth Republic has witnessed the emergence of populist leaders who employed various populist strategies to mobilise support among the masses during election campaigns. Political leaders like former President Muhammadu Buhari, President Bola Ahmed Tinubu and the presidential candidate of the Labour Party in the 2023 presidential elections, Peter Obi have been linked with populist tendencies in Nigeria (Adeakin & Zirker, 2017; Adebani, 2017; Onapajo, 2021; Ndubusi & Orjinmo, 2023; Okocha & Ishaku, 2023; Katsina, 2023; Ojo, 2023; Fasan, 2023; and Farooq, 2024). Their key leadership styles and populist politics and strategies as shown in literature include the following:

### **Muhammadu Buhari**

Muhammadu Buhari was elected president in the 2015 general elections as the APC flag bearer. A large segment of the Nigerian society who were disenchanted with the ruling PDP's administration aligned with the Buhari's campaign rhetoric. During his election campaigns, Buhari portrayed himself as an "outsider" and anti-establishment leader committed to combat the alleged corruption of the PDP administration and promised to initiate an economic development pathway for the country (Adeakin & Zirker, 2017). While in office, Buhari introduced the Social Investment Programme, which was initiated to reduce poverty and enhance social welfare, and the TraderMoni scheme, which gave modest loans to small business owners (Katsina, 2023). His populist policies of free meals for school children, payment of N5,000 allowances to discharge NYSC members, monthly allowances for indigent Nigerians, free houses, and ending insurgency in the North resonated with the Nigerian populace. His popularity among certain Nigerian voters was influenced by these policy initiatives as well as his rhetoric about combating corruption and standing up for the rights of the average Nigerian (Katsina, 2023).

Adebani (2017) emphasises the role of morality in the 2015 general elections that brought President Muhammadu Buhari to power. He argues that the election was largely influenced by Buhari's moral status, messianic posture, and populist rhetoric that appealed to the masses and gave him full support. He presented himself as the champion of the common people against the political elite. He was seen as a virtuous and honest individual who could sail Nigeria to the Promised Land. The rhetoric of anti-corruption, change, and service to the people employed by Buhari resonated with the Nigerian voters who were dissatisfied with the political status quo. This shaped the election campaign and its outcome.

In the same vein, Fayomi and Ajayi, (2023) argue that in the 2015 presidential elections, Buhari employed massive populist tactics to rally support. This was such that populist rhetoric became pronounced as a significant force in the country's election campaign. Similarly, Onapajo (2021) identified Buhari's emphasis on national security and the fight against terrorism as one of his key populist strategies. His strong rhetoric during election campaigns on security helped him portray himself as a decisive leader who was willing to take bold actions to address the country's security challenges. Although, Buhari's populist strategies helped him gain significant popular support, they have also faced criticism from some quarters. Okocha and



Ishaku (2023), and Katsina (2023) linked Buhari's populist approach to authoritarian tendencies, with accusations of human rights abuses and crackdowns on dissenting voices. Katsina observes that there have been concerns about the effectiveness and sustainability of some of his populist policies, with questions raised about their impacts on the country's development. This reflects a gap between populist politics and real governance.

### **Bola Ahmed Tinubu**

President Tinubu is recognised for his grassroots mobilization politics and populist posture. According to Fasan (2023), Tinubu has built a strong political network by fostering strategic ties with interest-based associations, youth organizations, and grassroots organizations. He argues that Tinubu's populist image and influence in Nigerian politics have been entrenched by his capacity to connect with the common Nigerians and portray himself as the champion of their interests. He highlighted Tinubu's recent "education loan for students" as a component of his populist strategies. Similarly, Farooq (2024) observes that Tinubu has politically established an influential grassroots presence in the country, which has a significant base of support across the Nigerian states. He opines that Tinubu has developed ties with grassroots organizations, community associations, and local leaders to expand his political network and garner support from ordinary citizens. Farooq argues that Tinubu has been able to respond to people's concerns and show his dedication to meeting their demands by interacting with them at the local level.

The understanding that can be drawn from the foregoing is that Tinubu is a team strategist and political bridge-builder who has, over time built strategic alliances with various political leaders and interest groups, including influential individuals, civil society organizations, and politicians who share his views. His populist strategies have been characterised by grassroots mobilization, empowerment programmes, political rhetoric, and coalition building. For example, during the 2023 presidential election, Tinubu used populist rhetoric such as "E lo fokan bale, ama gbe wa le" (calm down, the pain will subside) to appeal to the feelings and emotions of the Nigerian people. He played on the fears, hopes, and dreams of the populace to rise to power. This helped him gain support and popularity among the people.

### **Peter Obi**

The 2023 presidential election campaign witnessed the emergence of Peter Obi, who ran a populist campaign for the presidency (Ndubusi & Orjinmo, 2023; Ojo, 2023). According to Ojo (2023), Peter Obi emerged during the 2023 presidential election as another prominent populist politician in the political history of Nigeria. He argues that Obi was able to mobilise perceived marginalised groups and aggrieved citizens, including students, market men and women, unions, and ethnic citizens, through his political rhetoric and direct criticism of the ruling administration. Obi's populist strategies manifested in the form of making impressive promises to address the grievances of the Nigerian populace, such as tackling corruption, improving living standards, and promoting social justice (Farooq, 2024).

Conversely, Ojo (2023) noted that part of Obi's populist strategies was his outspokenness against financial crimes and his emphasis on the need for stringent measures to combat money laundering, fraud, and other forms of financial malpractices in the country. He observes that



part of Obi's campaign rhetoric was his advocacy for the need to strengthen anti-corruption agencies and law enforcement efforts in tackling economic crimes within the Nigerian financial system. Some of the campaign rhetoric of Obi during the 2023 election include "It's time to take your country back", and "this election is the old against the new" (Ndubusi & Orjinmo, 2023). These attracted large supporters and portrayed Obi as the messiah committed to solve the myriad problems of the Nigerian society.

The key point central to the views of scholars on the phenomenon of populist politics in Nigerian democracy is that political leaders across parties employ populist rhetoric and mobilization strategies to garner support to achieve their political goals. Whichever way one may choose to look at it, populist politics has become a tool in the hands of Nigerian political leaders to mobilise public support. Though extant pieces of literature hold different opinions on the factors driving populist politics in Nigeria, they invariably attribute the prevalence of populist politics in Nigeria to issues like the Nigerian political economy situation, which is characterised by widespread poverty, inequality, corruption, religiosity, ethnicity, and dissatisfaction of the people with the political elites. These factors, among others, no doubt, have contributed to populist politics and the emergence of populist figures in Nigeria. These trends show that populist politics will continue to be a major force and threat to liberal democracy if appropriate measures are not taken to address its negative impacts. This current study, therefore, examines how populist democracy is construed as liberal democracy and strategies that can effectively address its negative impacts on Nigerian

### **Populist Democracy Construed as Liberal Democracy in Nigeria**

Populist and liberal democracies are two related forms of democracy that have lately attracted scholarly attention and discourse. On the surface, populist and liberal democracies look compatible since they stress the power of the people under a democratic government. In general, democracy is a system of governance in which the people, via their elected representatives, control the government (Lijphart, 2012). In a democracy, the people hold the representatives who are elected accountable to them. Democracy gives individuals an opportunity to participate in political decision-making (Dahl, 2015). Dahl lists popular sovereignty, political equality, and majority rule with minority rights as the basic principles of democracy. This conceptualization emphasises the importance of the majority in a democratic system. Democratic governments, therefore, allows the will of the majority over that of the minority, thereby satisfying the popular will. Suffice to say that in a democracy, political power belongs to the people, who govern via representatives they have chosen. This shows that representative government is a common feature of both populist and liberal democracy.

Globally, populist democracy highlights the idea of a division between "the people" and "the elite," claiming to represent the people's voice or will (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). Populist democracy emphasises lack of trust in the ruling elites and the existing political institutions (Mudde, 2017). This form of democracy is promoted by economic problems, social injustices, or discontent with the political system. Populist leaders in their characteristic nature often promote an "us vs. them" narrative by portraying "the people" as the genuine owners of power and authority as opposed to the ruling elites considered to be dishonest or irresponsible



(Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). Populist leaders often claim to be the true representatives of the people's will. They frequently undermine established democratic processes and institutions, such as the judiciary and other checks and balances that are crucial to liberal democracy.

Liberal democracy, in its true form, upholds individual rights, private property, the rule of law, and democratic institutions that facilitate citizens' participation in governance (Lijphart, 2012; Dahl, 2015; Johari, 2015). Dahl highlight the necessity of maintaining individual rights, particularly freedom of speech, freedom of religion, and the right to private property, as crucial to liberal democracy. Johari argues that the rule of law, which demands that both the government and its people be equally responsible to the law, is fundamental for the functioning of liberal democracy. Lijphart and Dahl stress the relevance of democratic institutions, including a multi-party system, an independent judiciary, and free and fair election procedures. They maintained that these are necessary for liberal democracy to function effectively and ensure the preservation of the people's interests. Liberal democracy supports pluralism and tolerance, which foster differences in opinions, values, and beliefs. It promotes inclusive political discourse, protects the rights of minorities, and makes it easier for various social groups to live in harmony with one another (Dahl, 2015).

In contrast to liberal democracy, populist democracy runs on a thin-cantered ideology that differs from genuine political ideologies such as socialism or liberalism (Mudde, 2004). It is more characterised by political talk rather than ideology. The main difference between populist and liberal ideology is that populist democracy is unstable and cannot provide answers to the socio-political questions as found in the political belief system of liberal democracy. The area of similarity between the two forms of democracy often construe to mean the same thing in political discourse is that they both employ political rhetoric during election campaigns to achieve their objectives. This similarity in practice is often mistaken for fully realizing liberal democratic values in Nigeria.

In political discuss, liberal democrats and populist leaders are often being accused of deploying political rhetoric to mobilise the public during election campaigns. Liberal democrats are criticised for claiming to be the genuine representatives of the people but often fail to sustain their rhetoric when in power. Populist leaders accuse the ruling liberal elites of incompetence, corruption, and policies that worsen economic inequality and provoke social tension. Liberal leaders often criticise populist leaders in power, accusing them of unrealistic promises of running a government that will treat all citizens as equals. Populist leaders claim that they are the people and that the people are with them, while liberal leaders, on the other hand, assert that they represent the people. Both populist and liberal leaders employ political rhetoric and name-calling to attack their opponents to gain public attention and support (Kidron & Ish-Shalom, 2024). This blame syndrome and name-calling, where an opponent is presented as the evil bedevilling the country characterise both populist and liberal democracies, each claiming to be the voice of the people. This political trend and practices constitute the interpretation of populist democracy as liberal democracy in Nigeria.

Although populist and liberal democracies emphasise popular power, their relationship is often



complicated and sometimes contentious. Populist politics poses a serious threat to liberal democratic institutions and norms in several ways (Müller, 2016). “Charismatic populist leaders who claim to represent the “true” will of the people often end up wielding too much influence.” They see democratic institutions such as the judiciary and multi-party system as barriers to the direct expression of public will. Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) observe that populist leaders often try to circumvent or discredit established political institutions such as the judiciary, and opposition parties. This trend undermines the existing democratic institutions, thereby weakening the checks and balances that are essential to liberal democracy.

Furthermore, the emphasis of populist democracy on the “common people” against the perceived “corrupt elite” fosters a climate of polarization and intolerance towards minority groups and dissenting voices. Chatterjee (2020: 84) argues that “in a populist democracy, society becomes divided between an oppressed people and the powerful elites.” He describes populist democracy as “a degraded form of democracy” characterised by anti-elitism, anti-pluralism, and politics of exclusion. Populists in power often hijack the state machinery, engage in mass clientelism, and suppress civil society. They project an “image of benevolent protectors of the poor and underprivileged” and embody sovereign power to rule without regard for legal and bureaucratic procedures and justice. Populist leaders, in this regard, are, “authoritarian in style and run a centralised machinery of power in which no challenger is allowed to emerge and are not averse to using force to repress the opposition.”

Given the above, it is undeniable that liberal democracy aims to ensure that every individual participates and is fairly represented, whereas populist democracy often puts the interests of one group ahead of those of all others. In Nigerian democracy, it is thus, essential to comprehend this dichotomy to preserve existing democratic institutions and practices. Since Nigeria returned to democracy in 1999, populist politics has gained traction in the country’s political space. Nigerian democracy has witnessed the emergence of political leaders who employed populist rhetoric, policies, and programmes to appeal directly to the masses. Political leaders such as Muhammadu Buhari, Bola Ahmed Tinubu, and the Presidential flag-bearer of the Labour Party in the 2023 presidential elections, Peter Obi, deployed populist rhetoric during election campaigns (Adeakin & Zirker, 2017; Katsina, 2023; Ojo, 2023). This has been attributed to the failure of successive administrations to enunciate human capital and economic development, social and cultural stability, strong institutions, a conducive electoral process devoid of political violence, and above all, to address corruption and security issues like the Boko Haram insurgency (Ibeanu & Momoh, 2019). These factors contributed to the growing public discontent and strengthened populist appeals in the country. This trend has led to a misinterpretation of populist electoral victories and governance that lacks transparency, accountability, and adherence to constitutional principles for liberal democratic legitimacy.

### **Conclusion**

This paper highlights the complexity associated with populist democracy and how populist tendencies disguised as liberal democracy have shaped Nigerian democracy. The study critically examines how populist democracy is construed as liberal democracy in Nigeria. It explores the implications of this misconception on governance, institutional integrity, and civic



engagement, while stressing the dangers of a political system driven more by mass appeal than by democratic ethos. The study revealed that the failure of populist and liberal leaders to sustain their political rhetoric and fulfil electoral promises is responsible for the misinterpretation of populist politics as liberal democracy in Nigeria. The study discovered that the form of liberalism practiced in Nigeria is built on a dependent economy where the ruling elites do not control the economy. The study also discovered that the impact of populist politics on liberal democracy in Nigeria includes politicization of ethnicity, polarization of the polity along religious and regional sentiments, undermining democratic principles, weak institutions, politics of lies and deceit, and erosion of checks and balances. The paper argues that the extent to which the people possess knowledge and understanding regarding the intersection of populist democracy with liberal democracy in Nigerian politics is low. The study holds that there is a need for deliberate measures to sensitise the Nigerian populace about the negative implications of populist politics and its misinterpretation as liberal democracy in the country.

### **Recommendations**

This paper recommends the need for public awareness campaigns to educate citizens on liberal principles and the dangers of populist politics in Nigeria. This calls for the involvement of the civil society organizations and the media to sensitise the Nigerian populace about the negative implications of populist politics and its misinterpretation as liberal democracy in the country. Political institutions should be reinforced to ensure accountability, transparency, and adherence to liberal democratic norms. The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) should be completely independent and transparent in its mandate to implement policies that can curb excessive populist rhetoric and money-driven politics during election campaigns. Judicial independence, media freedom, and legislative oversight must be strengthened to promote electoral integrity. This will guarantee democratic sustainability and realign governance with true liberal democratic principles in Nigeria.

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